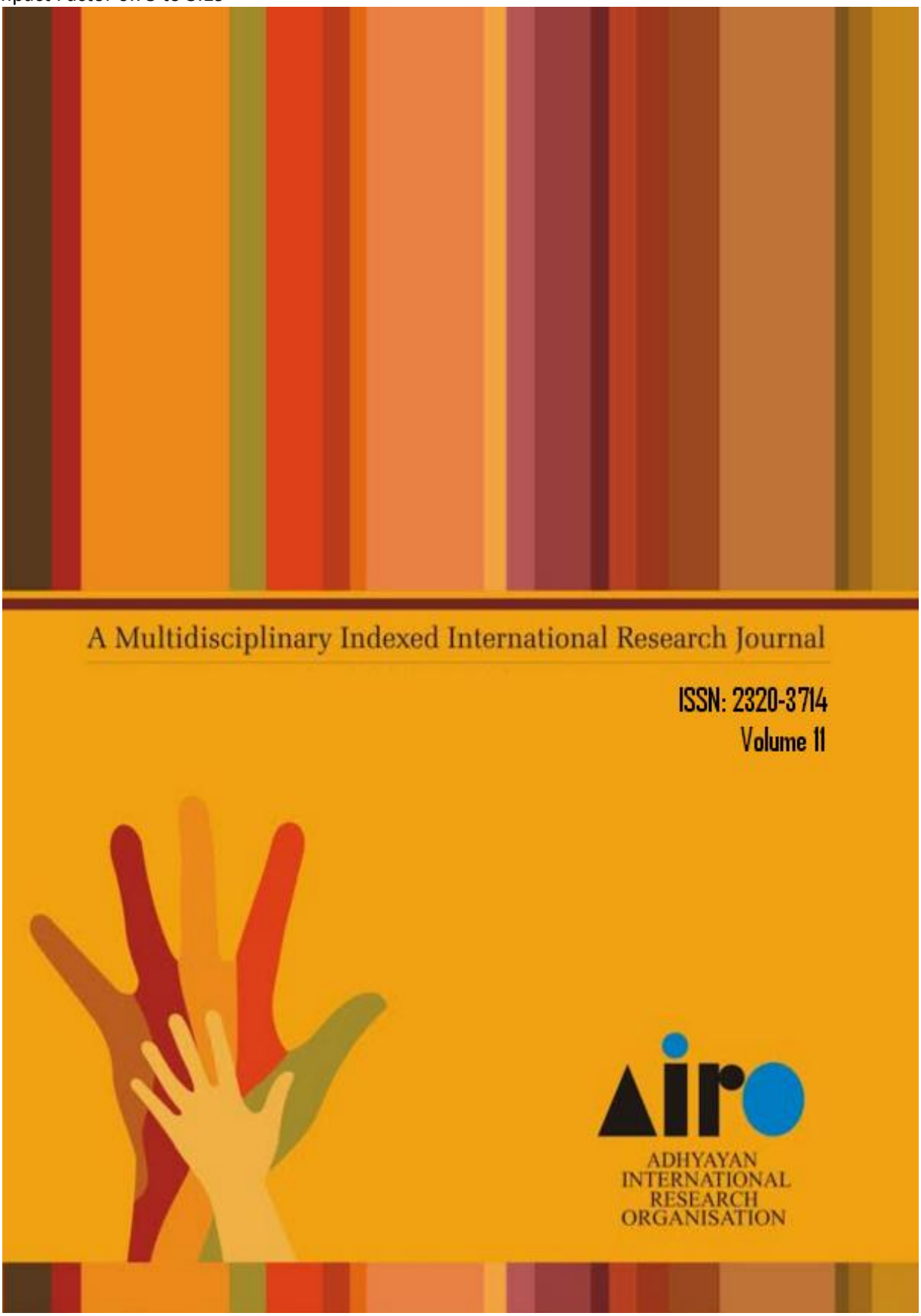
A Multidisciplinary Indexed International Research Journal
ISSN: 2320-3714
Volume 11
Airo
ADHYAYAN
INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH
ORGANISATION

Airo International Research Journal April, 2017
Volume XI, ISSN: 2320-3174
Impact Factor 0.75 to 3.19

# Treatment of Polarity in Robert Frost's "Birches" and "Mending Wall"

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## ABSTRACT

*In Robert Frost's poetry we find tension between regionalism and universalism; traditionalism and modernism; and nature and man. Frost's emphasis is on understanding the tension of contraries rather than a simple acceptance of it as a way of life. According to his view the meaning of human life finds consummate expression through a constantly maintained balance between opposing tensions. The present paper examines Frost's treatment of polarity with reference to "Birches" and "Mending Wall."*

***Keywords:*** *Polarity, dialectic, tension, traditionalism, modernism, etc.*

Robert Frost's poetry builds on the tension of polarity. The poet seems torn between his role as an observer of things– as they really are— and as an artist, constantly trying to perfect them. There is a sense of indecisiveness which gives his writing a strange charisma and power. His capacity for equal distribution of thought and emotion lies in his power of holding opposite states of mind in union when evaluating an emotion or spiritual experience. In his poetry we find tension between regionalism and universalism; traditionalism and modernism; and nature and man. Frost's emphasis is on understanding the tension of contraries rather than a simple acceptance of it as a way of life. According to his view the meaning of human life finds consummate expression through a constantly maintained balance between opposing tensions.

One of the most striking examples which is eloquent of poet's idea of life as counter-balancing of contraries is the poem _Birches'. In this poem the roads of fact and fancy run side by side and cross at places.

Frost realizes the relative importance of both the worlds. C. Day Lewis says about the poem that ―Birches‖ is a poem in which ‗fact and fancy' are perfectly blended. These two polarities of Frost's poetry indicate how the fanciful flights ‗toward heaven' are the results of an acute awareness of the harshness and coarseness of real life. In many of Frost's poems an object of nature becomes a medium of his climb ‗toward heaven'. But these are momentary flights, because ultimately Frost loves to come back to the ‗earth' and to begin it ‗all over again'. The momentary touch with the imaginary or the ideal world is only a rejuvenative escape which makes it possible for his characters to endure the bitter and harsh facts of life with greater enthusiasm, heroism and resignation. During his rise toward heaven the poet does not lose sight of the good earth which is the ultimate reality to him and his final destination. ―Birches‖ illustrates this idea most perfectly. In this poem the poet's climb ―toward heaven' ultimately results in a move ‗earthward'. The Persona in the poem is faced with the problem of choosing between heavenly truth and earth's truth. The poem begins with delight when it gives realistic description of birches ―bend to left and right‖. But gradually the poem takes on a note of peculiar seriousness when the birches become a medium of poet's rise ―toward heaven‖. The light tone gradually passes away when Frost realizes— ―so was I once myself a swinger of birches‖. Now, the harshness and bitterness of real world has taught him to be more serious as well as realistic. There is an acute awareness of the disillusionment and miseries of real life. Life refuses to show a definite path and ultimately man himself has to explore and find out the solutions of his problems. Frost projects man persistently coping with the complex condition of his own existence. In ―Birches‖ he describes life as:

*It's when I'm weary of considerations,*

*And life is too much like a pathless wood*

*Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs*

*Broken across it, and one eye is weeping*

*From a twig's having lashed across it open*

So, the poet makes his point very clear that it is when he is ‗weary of considerations' and life appears ‗like a pathless wood', he would like to forget about the bitterness of this early existence. Frost declares his flight toward the imaginary world as a momentary stay and as a period of probation so that he may face the complexities of real life more courageously. He declares:

*May no fate willfully misunderstand me*

*And half grant what I wish and snatch me away*

*Not to return.*

Frost certainly loves to come back to the earth for he knows that ―Earth is the right place for love. I don't know where it is likely to go better‖. It is this acute awareness of his earthly existence which shows that Frost is deeply rooted in reality. His ascent toward heaven is only a momentary phase. ‗Heaven' itself may be interpreted in many different ways. It may stand for some fanciful imaginary region, a dreamland or it may suggest some ideal place of spiritual perfection to which any human soul aspires. In both ways the flight toward heaven is a quest for perfection that our real human world denies. The momentary touch with perfection satisfies Frost for he ultimately accepts earth's reality. The polarity of fact and fancy go together throughout the poem. The crystal ice becomes heaps of broken glass: ―You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen‖. The arched trees are transformed into girls on hands and knees ―that throw their hair before them over their heads to dry in the sun‖. The country boy, ―whose only play was what he found himself‖, riding and subduing his father's birches, becomes the mature poet who announces: ―Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better‖. The central symbol of the poem ―the birch tree‖ serves to be a combination of fixity and flexibility which is deeply rooted in the actual world of reality and also capable of providing the poet a rejuvenating escape with its flexible top branches to the world of imagination when he feels ―weary of considerations‖. The effective use of this symbol enables Frost to communicate his conception of life as a two-way experience which can only be achieved by balancing the opposed forces the ideal with the real, the imaginative escape with the return to earth.

Mending Wall‖ is another remarkable example of the counterbalancing of contrary viewpoints: One _something there is that doesn‘t love a wall‘ and the other _good fences make good neighbours‘. The poem presents the psychological confrontation of a rational inquiring mind and an orthodox inert mentality regarding the issue of accurate division of land between them. The modern man does not feel the requirement of constructing a boundary wall between their fields. He says: _there where it is we do not need the wall‘. To emphasize his point he says:

*He is all pine and I am apple orchard.*

*My apple trees will never get across*

*And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him*

The orthodox man replies, _good fences make good neighbours‘. Though he does not give any logic to justify his point of view, he prefers to stick to his conventional belief which he imbibed from his ancestors. The contradiction is logical, for the opposing statements, _something there is that doesn‘t love a wall‘ and _good fences make good neighbours‘ are uttered by two entirely different types of persons. And both are right in their respective viewpoints. Walls have both positive and negative dimensions. Man cannot live without walls, boundaries, limits and particularly self limitations. Walls give him a sense of enclosure, privacy, security and individual identity. At the same time excessive adherence to walls may lead a man to a state of hyper individualism. Metaphorically, the walls have outgrown the purpose for which they were originally constructed. But, paradoxically, the modern educated farmer who alone knows that the wall is both a protection and a barrier, complies with the obstinate demands of his orthodox neighbour. He says:

*And on a day we meet to walk the line*

*And set the wall between us once again.*

The first part of the mending wall is anecdotal which gives the description of the damage done to the boundary wall and the efforts of the two farmers to reconstruct it. The brief narrative represents two entirely different perspectives towards tradition. The

modern man has a liberal inquiring mind. He says, '*Why* do they make good neighbors?

Isn‘t it‘. Modern man has full faith in the honesty of his neighbour and he is also considerate man who is concerned about the well-being of his neighbour. So, he fails to understand the relevance and necessity of building a boundary wall between their fields. As the modern farmer cogitates upon his own perspective regarding this complex situation, he sees his neighbour walking under the shade of trees grasping stones in each hand to construct the wall again. The modern man says: ‗He moves in darkness as it seems to me, not of woods only and the shade of trees‘. The image of darkness is symbolic in this line. It is not the darkness of the shade of trees, it rather symbolizes the ignorance of the orthodox man who lacks the ability to understand the hidden implications of the blind traditional belief. In his blind adherence to the orthodox conventions the neighbour expresses indistinctly human, aggressive and savage instinct for possession and repression——like an old stone savage armed‖. The modern man compares his neighbour to a man of Stone Age as he is grasping stones in his hands like a primitive defenseless man. Frost shows the inability of both neighbours to understand the contrary viewpoints of each other. The weakness of the orthodox man lies in his despair to believe in the humanity of his neighbour. He is a thorough conservative who keeps an indubitable faith in the validity of traditional beliefs. The modern man, on the other hand, is introspective and speculative. He does not believe in blind dogmas of traditional conventions, that is why, he questions his own assumptions:

*Before I built a wall I‘d ask to know*

*What I was walling in or walling out,*

*And to whom I was like to give offense.*

The brief narrative shows two opposed attitudes towards tradition and the poet seems to challenge the literal and therefore meaningless rituals, symbolized by repairing a wall where it is not actually needed. Either to put up a wall or to pull it down, Frost seems to suggest the cooperation of both farmers is essential. Or, as he put it in one of his letters: ―…in art, as in nature, we want all the differences we can get. In society too,

we want people and nations to maintain their differences—even at the risk of fighting one another.‖ In other words, Frost makes an appeal for tolerance and civilized relations between neighbours. Through his poetic representation of thought, in various forms of inner and outer dialogue, Frost provides counter-balanced ways of looking at one and the same thing from utterly diverse and contrary viewpoints. The role of wall as a symbol lies not in the fact that it shuts people off from each other (Good fences make good neighbours) or that it may be rationally unnecessary (Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out), but in its focus on the constant tension of opposing elements, which Frost observes as the essence of the human condition.

Frost, thus, plots the battlefield of his own enterprise. His zone is always realistic, practical circumscribed by an acute awareness of its human limitations. Critics often misinterpret Frost's acceptance of reality as easy passivity. In fact his acceptance is rarely easy and never passive. Frank Lentricchia observes in this regard ―In "Birches" Frost begins to probe the power of his redemptive imagination as it moves from its playful phase toward the brink of dangerous transcendence. The movement into transcendence is a movement into a realm of radical imaginative freedom where (because redemption has succeeded too well) all possibilities of engagement with the common realities of experience are dissolved‖ .To consider him a _spiritual drifter' is to miss the mark. It is to overlook the tough practicality which lies behind the affirmation of his poetry and the intellectual justification he seeks to give them. Frost's persistent adherence to hold contrary elements in a deliberate tension without looking for any absolute solutions is an intentionally adopted intellectual attitude. Floyd C. Watkins is right while observing, ―Despite all the apparent moralizing ("earth's the right place for love"), this passage is one of the most skeptical in Frost. He contemplates a moment when the soul may become completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, limited, and afraid. No sooner does he wish to get away from earth than he thinks of "fate" - rather than God. And what might be a mystical experience turns into a fear of death, a fear that he would be snatched away "not to return." He rejects the unknown, the love of God, because he cannot know it, and he clings to the finite: "Earth's the right

place for love.‖To him, the full experience of life can be achieved by balancing the opposed forces despite the strong negative pull. Once the reader acquaints himself with the inherent logic of Frost's thought process, he can easily grasp the latent symbolism of his poetry.

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